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THE PSYCHOLOGY OF THE PROPHET¹

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It would not be *à propos*, in this paper, to discuss all the influences which have little by little broken the bonds of custom and given the individual man a standing of his own within the group or tribe. I wish, however, to suggest that one of these influences has been these selfsame strange experiences to which I have referred, and which are taken to mean that the individual is possessed by some peculiar external and perhaps superhuman power.

When a man in a primitive tribe has a vision, falls into a trance, or speaks in a seemingly strange tongue, he at once attracts attention; his various doings and experiences, even when they chance to be quite commonplace, acquire a significance in the eyes of his fellows that they could not possibly have if he were always in a normal condition. Furthermore, if, as a result of his experiences, he is consulted on important matters, or if he becomes more or less of a leader of his fellows, he is, in so far, raised above custom and started to thinking for himself. His own private personal states have now a recognized significance in his social group, and if he cultivates that aspect of himself, even though it be relatively a pathological aspect, he is cultivating an individuality that can transcend custom. Whenever he speaks his words will have weight, even though they contradict tradition; when he enjoins new modes of conduct, or condemns old usages as bad, he will be listened to and followed because he is thought to be under the control of something other than himself, or because it is the voice of God speaking through him. Now, if a person when "possessed" attains a degree of prominence unusual for normal persons, he will retain some of his pre-eminence when he is in his normal frame of mind. He will, even then, continue to be regarded by his fellows with a certain awe. The periods of normal conscious-

¹ Continued from the June number, p. 410.

ness in such a person, unless he is thoroughly demented, will alternate with the periods of possession. It is in these better balanced moments that he will reflect upon his experiences and seek to interpret them. His reflections upon these experiences and upon events and usages about him will have an added meaning because he will believe that he is even then under the guidance of his power.

It is in such conditions as are outlined above that we may find the beginnings of that phase of prophetism which is of the most positive significance in the history of religion. This phase we may call reflective prophetism. The man who believes he is inspired may be stimulated to go on and think for himself. His occasional extraordinary experiences assure him that his inner thoughts have a validity irrespective of customary religion and morals. Of course he will be apt to interpret his reflections as further phases of inspiration, that is, he will not regard them as his own thoughts but as God's breathed into him. The significant thing, however, is that *he may thus really think for himself*.

The reflective phase of prophetism occurs only in a relatively advanced stage of social development, a stage which it not only depends upon, but which it has helped to bring into existence. The later Hebrew prophets, beginning with Amos and Hosea and extending through the Isaiahs, are the great examples of reflective prophetism. Behind them lay the conception of the prophet as an inspired or possessed man. There is evidence that all of these men were also at times possessed by something like the primitive frenzy, at least they claimed to have visions, and they sometimes behaved in quite unaccountable ways so that they may have been regarded by their contemporaries as more or less mad or insane. We recognize, of course, that the later and greater Hebrew prophets, especially, disclaimed any connection with the primitive ecstatic type. They clearly saw that "possession" was no guaranty of divine leading. While admitting that they rose distinctly above that type of prophecy, it seems to me possible that they may have owed something to it. This reputation for madness may have been due in part to the fact that they so vigorously opposed the corrupt practices of the later monarchies. A favorite

accusation to bring against anyone who varies widely from the customary order of things is that he is a crank, or crazy. It may be said to be a general law of human society that every variant individual is relatively pathological in the eyes of the rest of the social group. But while some of the madness of these later prophets may be explained in this way, there is no doubt but that they had their "experiences" and that they thought that they found in these experiences a divine sanction for their great messages and pleas for moral regeneration. In fact, in all ages a great message seems to require an accompaniment of some unusual manifestation if it is to meet with a wide acceptance. When this is lacking the preacher drops to the level of a mere moralist, able, no doubt, to express many wise ideas, but unable to excite much popular interest. Even in modern preaching, there is a widespread prejudice among ignorant people against the reading of sermons, on the ground that the minister, if he reads, will not be able to give himself up sufficiently to divine leading. A written sermon is thought to be the product of the speaker's own intellect. At any rate, if the audience sees the minister actually "possessed," as it were, in its presence, it is much more impressed with the weight of the words spoken. I myself knew some years ago a very fervent and scholarly preacher of whom it was said that, in the beginning of his ministry, he was taken to task for not couching his message in the tones regarded by his sect as particular evidence of divine inspiration. His message was admitted to be edifying but it required the coloring of a peculiar sing-song tone to make it really weighty. This is a curious remnant of the primitive notion that a prophet must give evidence of the truth of his words by his being able, as he speaks, to pass into some ecstatic state when he will be *en rapport* with some higher power.

As regards the content of the message of the ancient prophet, there are several aspects which deserve consideration from the psychologist but which can only be mentioned here. As we have seen, it was not so much *what* the early prophet said as the fact that he was able to throw himself into a divine ecstasy that impressed his hearers. Hence the chief content of the most primitive prophecy consists in these very states of possession by superior

powers. Music and dancing figure largely in the proceeding, and the message is little more than incoherent utterances, or possibly songs or chantings, which, though meaningless babblings, are supposed by the listeners to be some divine or mystic language.

It is only with the development of the reflective phase, mentioned above, that the preaching ordinarily associated with the prophet became possible and this, as we have seen, was really the outcome of the reflective attitude of mind rather than of any trace of the primitive ecstatic frenzy.

There is another aspect of the prophet's message that is of interest, namely, that of prediction. Later ages have assumed that the Hebrew prophet foretold the course of events, even hundreds of years in the future. It is probably the supposed ability to foresee the future that has impressed all of us most forcefully and it has been the one characteristic of prophecy which it has been hardest for us to give up. The Hebrew word *nabhi*, however, only by implication conveys the idea of prediction. The *nabhi* is an inspired person and he is therefore one who delivers divine messages. But to the primitive mind the notion of inspiration carries with it the ability to foretell the future. To it there is nothing incredible or impossible about forecasting the future, especially if one can get *en rapport* with superior powers. Of course this does not mean that primitive people have any theories of foreordination, by which, in the divine mind, the entire course of events to the end of time is mapped out in detail. They merely assume, in a naïve way, that whatever they are anxious to know about or to do can be accomplished for them by the all-potent power which is about them and above them. Hence, quite naïvely, they attempt to turn to account their supposed influence with this superior power. We are all familiar with the various methods for determining the future which were used by the Hebrews along with other primitive peoples. In some cases the sacred lot was used, sometimes the future was revealed by visions or dreams, or in trances or ecstatic states. In all cases the fundamental supposition is that it is in these ways that the power is operative.

Thus the later Hebrew prophets, with the traditions of divination and of peering into the future back of them, quite possibly

considered it as part of their function to reveal the course of events to come as well as to plead for a higher plane of morality in the present. In fact, the plea for a better present life would be much enforced by taking a larger view of things, by seeing that all events, past, present, and future, are bound together in one organic whole. Here, indeed, we have the clue to some of the predictions. They were of the same type possible to all persons of keen insight into contemporary conditions and with some knowledge of past events. In many instances the prophet could easily say, "The things happening now, the deeds you are piling up, can have only one outcome, that is, national disaster and perhaps subjugation to some powerful enemy." But even where the prediction is easily based upon knowledge of contemporary events, it is doubtless true that the prophet as well as his hearers attributed the insight to *rapport* with Jehovah.

The prophets, however, did not confine themselves to predictions of this type. If we leave out of account those predictions which may be regarded as mere flights of poetic fancy, the expression of the national aspiration for a deliverer, as in the case of the so-called messianic prophecies of the unknown author of the latter part of Isaiah, there still remains a residuum of what may be regarded as genuine attempts at prediction. It should be recognized that later ages have very much exaggerated the prophet's supposed power to predict the future. When he predicted it was nearly always conditionally and with reference to events in the immediate future, not hundreds of years hence, as most people even yet suppose. It would be difficult to go through the writings of the prophets and select with any assurance just those passages which are genuine predictions, and yet prediction was so thoroughly in harmony with the tradition of prophecy that it can scarcely be doubted that they attempted to forecast the course of things to come. In fact, popular belief down to our own day has clung to the notion that the prophet may really in some mysterious way have the future revealed to him. This belief had been supported by the supposed fulfilment, in even minute details, of the predictions of the Hebrew seers. Among ourselves, also, there are people who claim to have forecast the future, but the evidence

they have offered in support of their claims has not been such as to pass unquestioned upon scientific examination. In general, it seems that a prediction which is actually fulfilled is either a lucky guess or a shrewd deduction based upon keen insight into present conditions. Moreover, the prediction which turns out to be correct attracts attention and is remembered, while those which fail are passed by and forgotten. A statistical study of modern prophecies, and there are many more of them than the reader may imagine, would reveal vast numbers of unfulfilled ones to every one apparently fulfilled. In many cases the fulfilments that are instanced are quite fanciful, the prediction being so ambiguous as to be susceptible, as those of the Delphic oracles, of two interpretations.

I could give many illustrations of the above point, for I once had the privilege of being the next-door neighbor of a modern "prophetess." Here is a typical example of her deliverances. The house in which she was living was for rent and a butcher came to look at it. As he went away, saying he would let them know later as to whether he would take the house, the woman had a vision, or a sort of hallucination, in which she saw the butcher leaving the house followed by a long line of sheep. On the basis of this vision she said that he would never rent the house, which, indeed, proved to be correct.

Popular belief in the possibility of prophecy has tended to smooth out the difficulties in the supposed fulfilments which appear when these are critically examined. The so-called fulfilments of the Hebrew prophecies require a very liberal interpretation of the meaning conveyed by the prophecies. Many of them have not in any genuine sense been accomplished. Of these may be mentioned the return of the Jews to the promised land and the restoration of the kingdom of David. Others have had only a symbolic fulfilment. Some of the predictions have no meaning except when taken as allegories, but it is hardly likely that the prophets themselves regarded their messages as allegorical. The most striking prophecies, those contained in the Book of Daniel, are now believed to have been written after the events they were supposed to foretell. The messianic prophecies deserve a careful psychological

analysis because there are many complicated mental factors which need to be taken into account. Possibly some quite straightforward utterances have been transformed by later ages into predictions. Is it not conceivable that even Jesus himself modified details of his conduct, perhaps quite naïvely, to conform to the statements of the Old Testament which he took to refer to himself? It is even more likely that the different persons who contributed to the gospel stories in all honesty recounted the events in such a way that they seemed to be definite fulfilments of predictions made centuries before. Not infrequently do we find it recorded that such a thing was done that it might be fulfilled as was spoken by a certain prophet. It would be almost inevitable that an uncritical writer, firmly convinced that Jesus was the Messiah, and believing thoroughly in the possibility of prediction, should imagine he detected in the ancient writings foreshadowings if not actual foretellings of many of the details in the life of Jesus. In some cases the quotations which these New Testament writers make from the Old Testament are inexact, in others the original meaning is obviously twisted. The psychologist is conversant with the fact that it is quite possible for a person whose mind is saturated with a certain idea to see objective happenings in a very distorted perspective and yet be entirely sincere in his belief that he sees correctly. Hence we can see that the view here set forth of the fulfilment of prophecy in the New Testament does not in any manner attribute moral perversity to those writers, nor does it detract in any way from their lofty religious messages.

The conclusion to which we are drawn, taking into account such facts as are mentioned above, is that the whole conception of prediction, while a common one both in ancient and modern times, is adventitious to religion and is a relic of primitive superstition. It is not in any sense an important element in prophetism, even though it has often been associated with it. The theory of the possibility of prediction is but a special application of the more general idea that the prophet is under the control of a higher power and is therefore endowed with various extraordinary abilities, among which is that of being able to see the future. As far as positive influence upon the development of religion is concerned,

the real significance of the prophet lies in the fact that he may become a preacher, a man of deep insight into life and the conditions of righteousness.

The inspiration of the prophet presents another interesting psychological problem. The Hebrew prophets, both the earlier and the later ones, felt when they spoke that it was under the control or the inspiration of the spirit of Jehovah. Almost every page of their writings emphasizes the vividness of this conviction. Whether their words were predictions, or merely exhortations to a higher plane of righteousness, they regarded them as not their own but Jehovah's. This sense of inspiration is also capable of comparative study and even of psychological analysis. Mohammed believed himself to be the mouthpiece of Allah, and the long line of prophets, both pagan and Christian, have been emphatic in their assertions that they were but the instruments of expression of some deity. Joseph Smith the Mormon, Monod the French messiah, Dowie, and the many also who have been fortunate enough to gain the recognition of the orthodox church, have claimed that they were at times in the control of a power not their own, which they interpreted as that of God. Now, there is no reason for assuming that these persons were guilty of conscious deception in making such claims. It is a well-known fact of psychology that it is possible for a person in almost any vocation to have sudden uprushes into clear consciousness of ideas so vivid and so well organized, in fact, so foreign to everything which that person imagines he has previously thought about, that he feels quite naturally that they can come only from a source outside himself. The poet of ancient times was regarded as possessed of a divine frenzy when he composed his verses, and he was, in fact, scarcely differentiated from the prophet. This same sense of inspiration is frequently referred to by the poets of all ages. Orators also have their inspirations, and so do scientific men, mathematicians, artists, and even people in the ordinary walks of life. All feel at such times that they are in the sway of a superior mind, for the things they find themselves doing are so different from those of which they are ordinarily capable. Goethe, to give one instance, states that almost the whole of the *Sorrows of Werther*

seemed to burst forth into the focus of consciousness without previous thought on his part. It appealed to him with all the quality of a divine inspiration. Sir William Hamilton reports that some of his great mathematical generalizations flashed upon him in this same manner. Now, for a person who is unfamiliar with the psychology of such phenomena and who also believes in the possibility of spirit possession, the conclusion is almost irresistible that, in such cases as these, some external and perhaps divine power has actually used the man as a vehicle of expression. It would not be fitting to go into details at this point. Suffice it to say that every aspect of the feeling of inspiration or of control by superior powers as described by the prophet, the poet, or the orator can be paralleled, either in ordinary experience or in cases of mental pathology.

On the side of inspiration, then, we may willingly grant to the prophet elevated and even powerful thoughts. In fact, the successful preacher, poet, orator, or writer must have a rich background of experience, a subconscious self, we may call it for want of a better term, on which he can draw freely and deeply. He must be capable of powerful enthusiasms and he usually is. If we wish to give a scientific account of such a person, however, we gain nothing by trying to account for his power through external agencies. If his message is true it carries the warrant of its truth upon its face or it proves itself by its influence in shaping the affairs of men for the better. If the message is true, it could not be made any truer through the fact that it was inspired by some spirit or deity. Moreover, if spirit inspiration were proved to be possible, we should still have to test the message by its effect upon human life before we should be satisfied as to whether it came from a good or an evil spirit. The whole popular belief that the truth or excellence of the prophet's message depends upon whether it comes from some source outside himself or not is but a remnant of the primitive superstition that what is well known is commonplace and trivial while what is striking or unusual is therefore divine.

What, then, is the positive outcome of our exposition? It is that religion should get rid of the notion that God communicates

with man through some special states of mind, or through the subconscious self, as some prefer to call it. Such a notion is crass and primitive. God is not a phenomenon, nor is he a person like ourselves, nor is it easy to think of him as one among many causes. All we really know, when we leave off figurative language, is that the Deity is a valuational concept rather than a term descriptive of reality in the same sense that a "chair" refers to some external object that may affect our physical senses. God symbolizes an intangible, but not less real, essence of value in the universe. Hence when he speaks to man it is not necessary for us to suppose that he must do it as we do by a voice, or even through apparitions, or by stirring up subconscious thoughts in us, or by implanting in our minds ideas unconnected with or foreign to our previous systems of thought. He may appear, rather, in *all* the varied phases of personal activity and yet not in any sense be an interpolation. If we are able to express a noble thought, or if, by reflection, we come to a deeper insight into duty or righteousness, we just in so far express, or bring to light, the values implicit in this great unfathomed universe. We have expressed the essence of this worth just as the scientist may, by his formulas and descriptions, express the laws of physics or of chemistry. We may call it all an inspiration, if we choose to put it that way, but not in the sense that it is something adventitious or something that has been miraculously introduced into consciousness from without. It is an activity of the conscious being itself, working according to its own nature. It is a satisfying thought that we may, through the normal processes of our human nature, thus be able to express something that is valid, true, and abiding.